

Vietnam in centre-periphery relationship viewed from the theory of cultural-social space

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Abstract: *In today globalized world, cultural-social space has one more very important feature, that is the interregional relation. Countries may construct the cultural-social space beyond their own ecological space. Some scientists said about the phenomenon of “freedom from China”, or “de-sinolization”, of Japan and South Korea. The others said about this phenomenon as the “freedom from the centre” for the sake of development. But in author’s opinion, there is the problem of “choice of centre” and not that of “freedom from the centre” nor “negation of centre”. Japan and South Korea have re-chosen the centre by leaving the old centre for a new and more advanced one that is the Occident, establishing a cultural-social interregional space. By that way, they both have developed to be free from peripheral status and become the new centres of the region and even of the world.*

In the relations of Vietnam with East Asia, Vietnam should not see China as the unique centre which would afford to satisfy its requirements of development. The development successes of Japan and South Korea show that one country can choose several centres in order to exploit every advanced condition for development. Vietnam already has the policy of multilateralism of international relations. But if these multilateral relations are in equal level, then the cooperation will spread like rambling, not being able to take full advantage of strong points of some world leading centres. In this spirit, Vietnam may yet take full advantage of positive resources of China, but it also should choose more other centres for partnership. We - the Vietnamese - must put the centre-periphery relation forward as the priority relation and not multilateralizing equally the international relations. Today, centre-periphery relation is the relation of those in cultural-social space of the globalized world, being beyond the ecological space. It requires us to change the traditional view about a closed three-dimensional cultural-social space. This is the sens of the problem of choosing the centre in globalized world that requires us to be aware of, if we don’t want to lag behind in peripheral status.

Keywords: Centre - periphery, Cultural-social space, Vietnam.

1. Some theories of cultural-social space

At the beginning of the 20th century, the French social scientist Henri Lefebvre made effort to construct a science which he called “the science of (social) space”. Based on the materialist marxism, Lefebvre considered that while natural space is the “created” creation of nature, the social space is “produced” by mankind. In his opinion, a created thing is a “creation” which is unique, unrepeated. Meanwhile, the social world is a world of things made by men. They are produced by production forces and by means of production and through modes of production, therefore they are possibly repeated “products” (that is they could be mass products). Likewise, social space is also the space which men produce by means of production forces and means and through modes of production. That why Lefebvre said *social space is social product* (Henri Lefebvre, 1991: 26).

In opinion of Lefebvre, we saw that social space is in close relation with the appearance of knowledge, culture and capital accumulation. Thus, his social space has a cultural feature moreover, so that we can call this space the cultural-social space. Lefebvre also considered that each society produces its own space. In the space of capitalist society, Lefebvre was always aware of the distinction between urban space as the centre and rural space as peripheral areas. In his conception, town is the site in which the production forces are strongly developed under administration

of the political forces, in the same time here there is a high accumulation of knowledge, technology, culture and art resources. In capitalist society, the dominant space is space of the centre of wealth and power, this space controls those spaces that it dominates - those that are peripheral ones. In Lefebvre’s opinion, peripheral spaces always are dependent spaces, dominated by central spaces.

According to Lefebvre, one can say the most important feature of social space is that which attaches closely to modes and relations of production, so that enabling it to reproduce and have repeatable character, unlike the uniquely creativity of natural space. However, although having repeatedness, social space is not the same everywhere. In his opinion, every society has its own space; every region, every locality, every city also have their own space. Thus, the important elements making spaces different are those of social relations, of production relations and of production forces... (Henri Lefebvre, 1991: 86).

In 1977, the French ethnologist Georges Condominas published the work *Social space* (printed in the book *Social space in Southeast Asia*, 1980), in which he stated that “Social space is *the one which is defined by a set of relation systems characteristic of a certain people group*” (Georges Condominas, 1997: 16). Condominas also defined some characteristic aspects of social space as follows:

1) *The relations with space and time.*

Space and time in social space are ecological ones. Ecological space provides resources for the life of mankind, ecological time impulses the life in the rhythm of seasons. In Condominas' opinion, these are the basis of social space. Space and time are connected with each other in the culture of community in a space and do not exit independently. Especially, Condominas called attention to conception of direction of several ethnic groups: besides four directions of East, West, South and North, people also talks about another direction: *the direction of centre* that synthesizes all characters of the other four directions.

2) *The relations with environment*. This is the relation between man and ecological system, one of the heading important factors of social space. In this relation, man exploits the nature to make social space.

3) *The exchanges of wealth*. Exchanged wealth of a community in a region is also a feature characteristic of a social space.

4) *The communication relations: Language and writing*. Language and writing are the factors that help establishing and promoting the relations in social space.

5) *The kinship and neighbour relations*. These are relations effecting the life of a community in a social space. The kind of kinship relation, e.g. paternity or matriarchy relation, is a characteristic of social space (Georges Condominas,

1997: 22-54).

The conception of Condominas leans toward culture, so that in his interpretation, social space is just cultural-social space.

However, both of Lefebvre and Condominas conceived the cultural-social space in close three-dimensional structure and not from open view of globalization. As an ethnologist, Condominas only viewed cultural-social space in frame of one people, one ethnic group. Therefore, they both could not explain the post-national cultural-social spaces and the global cultural-social spaces of inter-national cooperation relations, or these are an important feature of centre-periphery relation in the era of "flat world".

In the present-day global world, the third character of cultural-social space in the theory of Condominas has an important role, that is the exchanges of wealth. Besides this, I see another very important feature more, that is *the inter-regional relation* or *inter-spatial relation*. For example, before now Cuba and Vietnam had a common cultural-social space of socialist community, beyond their ecological environment space. Japan and South Korea also have a cultural-social space in an environment of relations with the West, beyond their own ecological space. This is the characteristic of cultural-social space in the globalization era that we need to pay attention when studying the problem of centre-periphery relation in cultural-social space.

2. Vietnam in the centre-periphery relation viewed from cultural-social space

In the Southeast Asia and in the East Asia more, one may put the question: Vietnam is being in the centre or in the periphery? This is the question which needs to be answered so that we can define our development direction.

From the Day of Renovation, Vietnam has effectuated the openness line to integrate oneself into the world. We have joined in the many international organizations, from regional organization like ASEAN to biggest one as United Nations. In the ASEAN, Vietnam has built a important position, but it not yet the centre of region, neither in the level of East Asia space.

According to data of 2015 online *State Tax Review*, GDP of ASEAN of the year 2014 was estimated at about 2,500 billion USD; GDP per capita of this year was about 4,000 USD (or 7,800 USD by purchasing power parity). Although lower than that of Asia and the world, but its growth speed was higher.

As the member of ASEAN, GDP in USD of Vietnam in 1995 by exchange rate was 20.8 billion USD, ranking at 7th; in 2014 it was 187 billion USD, ranking at 6th (after Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Philippines). If counted by USD purchasing power parity, the rank of Vietnam was higher yet. This was the evident result when Vietnam achieved the relatively higher growth speed, namely the GDP growth of Vietnam in the period of 1995-2014

was 6.77% per year, ranking at second after Myanmar. But in the period of 2009-2014, Vietnam achieved only 5.79%, ranking at 4th after Myanmar, Laos and Indonesia.

GDP in USD per capita by exchange rate of Vietnam in 1995 was 289 USD, ranking at 10th in region, in 2014 this GDP was about 2,061 USD, passing to 7th rank (after Singapore, Brunei, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines). Thus by ratio, Vietnam in 2014 was higher than in 1995 in comparison with other ASEAN countries. In other words, if only viewing the GDP growth, we can not see the possibility of lagging behind, but considered from the absolute difference, Vietnam is still in tendency to lag farther behind.

As far as the human development index (HDI) is concerned, although Vietnam has improved, but its HDI is still in the low rank of the region (at 7th rank behind Singapore, Brunei, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines and Indonesia), due mainly to the low income index (<http://tapchi.taichinh.vn>).

According to 2015 ranking of World Bank, Vietnam was in 6th rank among ASEAN countries with GDP about 322 billion USD, behind Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines and Singapore. In Asia, China is at the first place in GDP (12,674 USD), then come India (4,793 USD) and Japan (4,490 USD). In the world, United States has the first rank (15,684 USD), after it there are China, India and Japan (<http://hoithao.vn/sac-mau-cuoc-song...>).

In the field of culture, Vietnam has achieved a remarkable position. In the Summit of writer unions from three countries of Indochina region, held in October 2006 in Ho Chi Minh City, the Vietnam Writers Union had initiative of organizing the Literature Conference of Three Indochina Countries (namely including Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia) in Hanoi next year, and of creating a literature prize named “Mekong Prize” for three Indochina countries. From 6th to 10th of October, 2007, the first Literature Conference of Three Indochina Countries awarded Mekong Literature Prize for some writers of three countries. Then, the Prize was awarded every other year alternatively in each of three countries. In the fifth conference (in 2014), the Conference opened to admit Myanmar, Thailand and China, and decided to award the Prize annually. In 2015, the Prize was awarded for the sixth time.

In the field of sports, Vietnam is obtaining the important place in the ASEAN region. We have gotten the higher rank in many categories. We can say Vietnam is gaining the cultural prestige in the region and is striving for central position in many fields of the region. However in general, this position is still far-away. Even in East Asia region, we are still at the periphery.

In the past, Vietnam, Japan and Korea were peripheral countries in comparison with China. Now Japan and South Korea (a half of Peninsula of Korea) have got

the freedom from peripheral status to become the centres along with China. According to Professor Ngo Duc Thinh, the peripheries of Chinese civilization space have at least two circles: The inner circle is close to Hua-xia (Hoa Ha) centre, comprising Bai-yue (Bach Viet) people at the South, Bei-di (Bac Dich) at the North and Qiang-zu (Khuong Nhung) at the West; the outer circle comprises the countries under the influence of Han civilization such as Japan, Korea and Vietnam. In his opinion, “there were several studies on mutual interactions of this East Asia civilization, putting out the attraction of peripheries by the centres and the diffusion from the centres to the peripheries” (Ngo Duc Thinh, 2014: 16).

Considered from centre-periphery relation, a peripheral country in development was always influenced by a certain centre, relying on a centre in order to develop. This is a development law. Vietnam, Japan and Korea were ever long influenced by Chinese civilization. But, as I said, an existing centre doesn't mean an everlasting centre. At one time, when a centre does not represent the progressive forces of the times, it will be replaced by another centre. If wanting to develop, the peripheral countries must change their relation with one centre. Having an advanced economico-cultural centre is the condition helping the peripheral countries to develop. In the modern times, China is no longer an unique centre having influence to impulse the development of East Asia

countries. There emerge other economic-cultural centres from the West. This can be viewed as the changing centre in the international relation.

One usually said that Japan and Korea are the two representative examples of “freedom from China” for development. From the very middle of 19th century, Japanese were soon aware of development situation of the world. They understood that centre of world development had emerged in the West. The emperor Meiji must hard struggle with conservative side for openness to the West, and in 1868 he launched a Restoration. In order to develop, Japanese at the Meiji times were seeking the cultural, scientific and technological centres of the West. And after World War II, when defeated and with country suffered heavy ruins, Japanese were more aware of needs for quick importation of Western technology for the sake of economic development. Year after year, Japanese had to save hard for the sake of sending students to the West. Moreover, Japan imported not only the Western sciences and technologies, but also the cultures and arts of the West for enriching its own culture, and, in my opinion, this is for *transformation* of Japanese cultural life style too to fit the new technological life. There were several Western authors who must wait until Renovation Day to be translated in Vietnam, but they were soon translated in Japan right after the War. The Japanese modern culture has the very new and different aspects in comparison

with traditional culture. Likewise, South Korea in the times after World War II also turned to the Western economic-cultural centre to seek the resources for development.

Japan, South Korea and also newly industrialized countries (NICs) of East Asia in general even had to change somewhat their ancient cultural thoughts and received Western modern cultural ones and transformed them into resources for development of country. Some scientists in the world noted that, in the times of capitalist development of certain East Asia countries, the Confucian thought of “rule of virtue” and attitude of refusal of private profit motive had to give up their place to individual consciousness and to Western modern state model. According to some Western observers, the degrees of administration by Confucianism, from principle of “self-improving, managing household and governing the state” to “pacifying the world”, all must conform to the thought of common responsibility and not to the personal ego. Confucian thought didn’t allow place for the private. All is in service of the common, of the community. Even the individual life (self-improving) and family life (managing household) also must serve the community. But in modern development period of East Asian capitalism, the communitarianism was broken for giving up the place to individual consciousness, to the thought of profit (Hahm Chaibong, 1997: 76-91). According to scientists, this very conscious-

ness plus modern state model were the favourable conditions for economic growth of East Asian NICs.

That is why some Vietnamese scientists said about the phenomenon of “freedom from China”, or “de-sinolization”, of Japan and South Korea (Ngo Duc Thinh, 2014). The others said about this phenomenon as the “freedom from the centre” for the sake of development. They considered that to be free from peripheral status, one must be free from centre. But in my opinion, this is the very problem of “choice of centre” and not that of “freedom from the centre” nor “negation of centre”. Japan and South Korea have re-chosen the centre by leaving the old centre for a new and more advanced one that is the Occident, establishing a cultural-social interregional space. By that way, they both have developed to be free from peripheral status and become the new centres of the region and even of the world. Thus, they both have not simply left centre for self-developing. Once being in periphery, a country must take full advantage of resources of a certain centre for development, for if leaving any centre, it might become isolated and lag behind.

Cuba is an example. According to the cultural-social space theory, when Soviet Union was ever a centre attracting the socialist countries, then Cuba was one of peripheral states of Soviet centre in the socialist space, beyond its ecological space. When Soviet Union

collapsed, the East European countries re-chose the West as the centre, meanwhile Cuba still stood alone, having risked to fall in isolation and crisis. Only in recent time, when the normalization of relation with United States was initiated, Cuba was proving itself to re-choose the centre. Choice of centre is the very key guideline of development.

Thus, in the relations with East Asia, Vietnam should not see China as the unique centre which would afford to satisfy its requirements of development. The development successes of Japan and South Korea show that one country can choose several centres in order to exploit every advanced condition for development. Vietnam already has the policy of multilateralism of international relations. But if these multilateral relations are in equal level, then the cooperation will spread like rambling, not being able to take full advantage of strong points of some world leading centres. In this spirit, the call for “freedom from China” is not likely the effective solution. In my opinion, Vietnam might take full advantage of positive resources of China yet, but we must not put ourselves under the dependence in all aspects on China. Meanwhile, we also should choose more other centres for partnership. Those new centres may be Japan and South Korea in Asia as well as Western advanced civilized centres. And We - the Vietnamese - must put the centre-periphery relation forward as the priority relation and should not multilateralize

equally the international relations. Today, centre-periphery relation is the relation of those in cultural-social space of the globalized world, being beyond the ecological space. It requires us to change the traditional view on a closed three-dimensional cultural-social space. The cultural traditional slogans such as “Selling distant brothers for buying close neighbours” or “The far water resource can’t stop the fire” are no longer suitable for today “flat world” space. This is the sense of the problem of choosing the centre in globalized world that requires us to be aware of, if we don’t want to lag forever behind in peripheral status.

By such a development guideline, Vietnam is continuing to effectuate a “choice of centre”. At latest time, in February 2nd 2016, Vietnam and 11 other countries have signed the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in Auckland (of New Zealand). This is the inter-spatial connection beyond the ecological space of a close region. Now, TPP comprises 12 members: United States, Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore and Vietnam, not including Russia and China. Half of this organization are the developed countries and it is a wide interregional space, in which Vietnam is one of three Southeast Asian member countries. This fact proves that Vietnam is decidedly seeking resource centre for development. And that is a right move for it to be free from peripheral status □

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